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## THE ADORATION OF THE KINGS

BY QUENTIN METSYS

**T**HIS is the third of the pictures of prime importance bought by the Museum during the current year. Unlike the *Meditation on the Passion* by Carpaccio, and the *Three Miracles of Saint Zenobius* by Botticelli, which had been lost sight of in recent years, this work since its exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1883 has been widely recognized as one of the best of the easel pictures by Metsys. About 1890 it was bought from Mr. R. H. Hughes of Kinnel, North Wales, by Mr. Rudolphe Kann. At the dispersal of the Kann Collection it passed into the possession of an English picture dealer and was purchased by the Museum last summer through the Messrs. Dowdeswell.

The work of Quentin Metsys has a particular value to the student of Flemish painting in addition to its intrinsic merit. He lived in the intermediate period between two great epochs; and his pictures, on the one hand, recall the solemnity of the great primitives and their sacerdotal style, and on the other, contain the promise of the magnificent rhetoric of Rubens. His elaborate devotional pictures, like the *Burial of Christ in Antwerp* and the *Legend of Saint Ann in Brussels*, are conceived in a manner allied to that of the old schools of Bruges and Tournay; but, when his clients and the subjects permitted, he allowed himself a novel picturesqueness and introduced details of genre or satire.

These traits are exemplified with admirable effect in the *Adoration of the Kings*. The Madonna and Child differ but little in intention from similar figures by the old masters; they have only become a little more worldly. The dreamy features of the Virgin are those which seemed to haunt Metsys throughout his whole career, and he used this same real or imaginary model for all his beautiful women, however different their characters. Even Herodias in the wing of the *Altarpiece at Antwerp*, who touches the head of Saint John the Baptist with her knife, has the same likeness.

The changing taste of the time is distinctly shown in the other parts of the picture. None of these figures has the reverential dignity with which the earlier artists endowed the Magi and their attendants. In its place is the curiosity about life and character which is so marked a quality of modern art. The decrepit old man who kneels before the Mother and Child is done with unflinching realism, and the characteristics of the negro who stands at the right are carefully noted with the interest of a keen observer to whom the race was unusual. The third king is of a more traditional type and is less successful than the others.

The followers who crowd the entrance of the porch are frankly grotesque. These buffoons with impossible features, distorted mouths, and caricature noses, seem to be rather unconvincing imitations of the Rabelais—like inventions which Hieronymus Bosch had begun to paint in the previous century and which proved so rich a heritage to subsequent artists.

The workmanship in this picture, as well as the conception, partakes of the traditional character. Notwithstanding the exactness with which the redundant detail is rendered and the variety and brilliance of the colors, the effect is broad and well unified and all the objects are enveloped in air. The predominant colors in the foreground, the blue of the Virgin's robe and the orange and black of the costume of the kneeling king, prophesy of certain of the color harmonies of Rubens.

The number 26, which occurs in a cartouche in the decoration of the pilaster, may refer to 1526 and be the date of the painting. This view is suggested by Dr. Friedländer. This, however, would bring the work later in the artist's life than its characteristics seem to indicate. If taken alone, these would point to a time soon after the painting of the triptych at Antwerp, the *Burial of Christ* (dated 1508), with the wings of which—Salome presenting the Head of Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist in the Boiling Oil—our picture has many points of similarity.

B. B.

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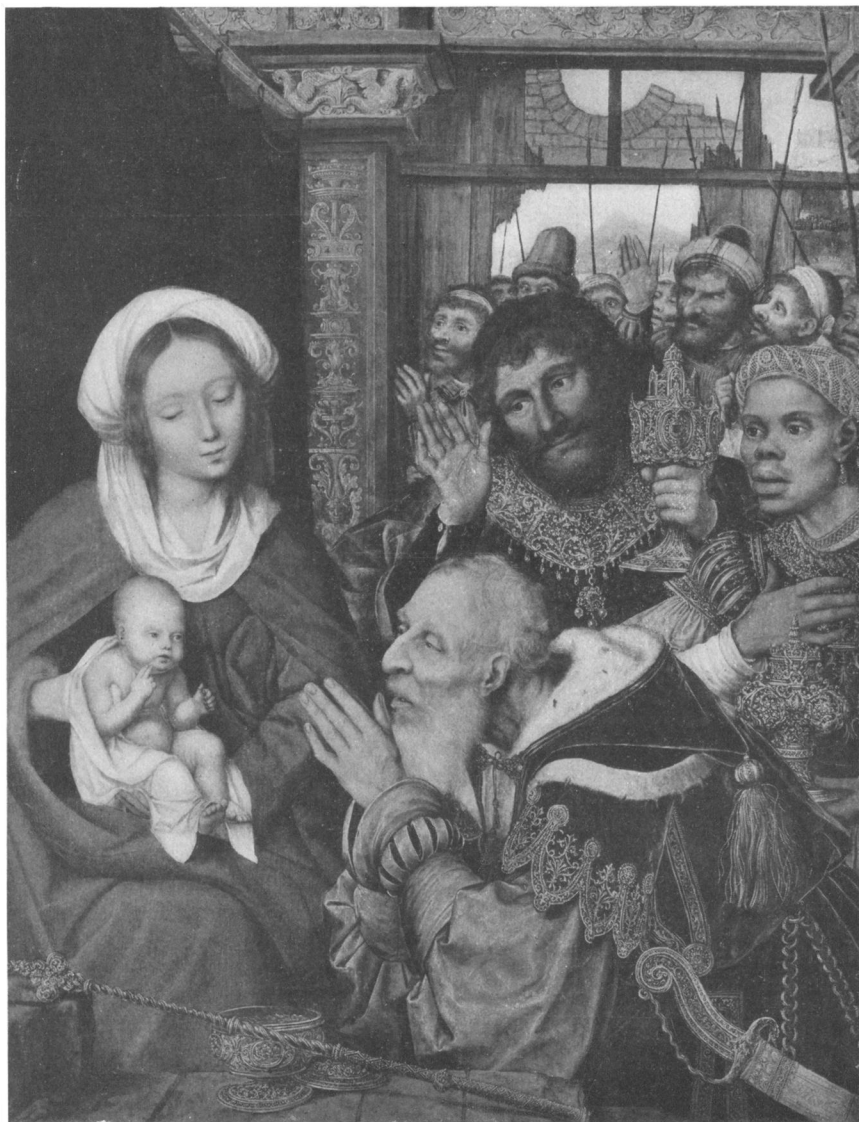
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